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# Putting Social Engineering on the Back Burner: Teaching Priorities in Formal Education in Rural Punjab, Pakistan\*

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## **Abstract**

This paper argues that the state of education in rural areas of Pakistan indicate an urgent need for policies which will improve the poor performance of existing schools. Social engineering to address gender and class imbalances, laudable though this may be, is counter productive to the immediate need for an elevation in existing basic standards of education. To this end, this paper suggests that educational reforms which do not attempt to challenge popularly held notions of gender and status would produce successful results which might then pave the way for more ambitious programmes in future.

## **Introduction**

Formal education in Pakistan has been, and should continue to be, targeted by development agencies and government institutions for some time. Although Pakistan has formally committed to providing universal free education at primary school level, it has not yet been able to accomplish this. The class, region and gender disparity in Pakistani education leaves large numbers of people excluded from career opportunities which would enable them to improve both their social and economic position. Organisations like UNICEF and Oxfam lay out exemplary objectives which reformers of Pakistani education should try to attain. This paper is consequently not a call for the abandonment of educational reform; rather, it is an attempt to identify why there are such gross differences in school enrolment rates between different sectors of the population. In addition, I suggest that community expectations of the educational experience learn an important role in setting the length of time a child may stay in expectation. Thus, if educational reforms are meant to raise national literacy and enrolment levels it may behove the state to comply with community expectations, even if they may be contradictory to what an indigenous urban minority elite or external donor may think is appropriate.

I first describe the educational situation in Pakistan of the recent past. I then use three school situations in a rural area of northern Punjab, Pakistan to highlight the ways that Pakistanis make strategic

choices in length of enrolment of their children. I conclude with some suggestions for ways in which Pakistani formal education might be improved without challenging local communities priorities. Ultimately, I believe that any educational reforms which insist on gender or class equality will fail in Pakistan. Helping Pakistan today necessarily means helping in ways that do not overtly challenge cultural values. As Pakistan's economic and political institutions develop and hopefully become more stable, it will then be possible to introduce more radical programmes targeting social inequalities. While I do not intend this paper as an apology for discrimination, I defend the rationality of local practice and suggest that there is less cultural bias against women than some pervasive rhetoric implies. Moreover, a poor family's educational strategy may be predicated on the notion that only one out of a large number of children will be sent to school; therefore, I again suggest that the problem of illiteracy and low school enrolment in Pakistan is the result of rational choices that people make and will not be helped by social engineering designed to tackle only a small part of the problem such as gender imbalances.

### **Education in Pakistan**

Oxfam identifies three important national barriers to education in low income countries: poverty, low public investment in education and decentralisation and privatisation [Watkins 2000: 171]. They rightly identify factors which are beyond specific cultural practices and tacitly acknowledge that before one begins any significant social engineering, these three areas need reform. Poor households withhold some or all of their children from education either because they cannot afford the costs of books, uniforms and school fees, or they cannot afford the loss of income which a school going child represents. Low income countries have not invested sufficiently in their educational systems for a number of reasons including International Monetary Fund imposed restrictions, aid money tied to particular purchases (in the case of Pakistan US aid is frequently tied to the purchase of American military hardware) and unfortunately government representatives skimming state resources. Decentralisation, the Oxfam report suggests, results in greater disparity between rich and poor regions. Privatising, for all its promise of creating dynamic opportunities, similarly, leads to even greater discrepancy between rich and poor.

By most standards Pakistani literacy and school attendance rates are extremely low. There are large discrepancies by region, class and gender. Data from the Pakistan Integrated Household Survey 1996/1997, suggests that the percentage of the population aged 10 years and over that has ever attended school ranges from as low as 11% (females in rural Baluchistan) to 81% (males in urban Sindh). The percentages for those who have actually completed primary school range from 4% (females in rural Baluchistan) to 64% (males in urban Sindh). Literacy rates demonstrate similarly wide disparities (see Table 1 "Literacy rates 1996/1997 (All income groups)"). The Federal Bureau of Statistics currently defines literacy as the ability to read a newspaper and to write a simple letter<sup>1</sup>. By this standard the range of literacy goes from 2% (the poorest quintile of females in rural Baluchistan) to 87% (richest quintile

of males in urban Sindh). The range is indicative of several problems in both resource allocation and cultural constraints. The national average for literacy (aged 10 years and over) is 51% for males and 28% for females but that fails to give an accurate picture of the very serious differences based on region and income levels.

**Table 1: Literacy rates 1996/1997 (All income groups)<sup>a</sup>**

<b>Province</b>	<b>Urban Males</b>	<b>Rural Males</b>	<b>All Males</b>	<b>Urban Females</b>	<b>Rural Females</b>	<b>All Females</b>
<b>Punjab</b>	64	45	54.5	51	21	36
<b>Sindh</b>	67	46	56.5	54	12	33
<b>NWFP</b>	58	43	50.5	34	13	23.5
<b>Baluchistan</b>	61	41	51	27	5	16

a. Data source: (PIHS) Pakistan Integrated Household Survey, Round 2: 1996-1997.

Oxfam ranks Pakistan 99th out of 104 low income countries in its overall performance on education. Pakistan received an Index Value of 53.94 on Oxfam's Education Performance Index (EPI - zero indicates good performance). Oxfam's EPI is derived from the net enrolment rate, net completion rate and the ratio of female enrolment [Watkins 2000: 347-350]. The Pakistan government acknowledges the need to improve education and in an attempt to do this has created Social Action Programmes (SAP). All Pakistan governments have at least paid lip service to the need for educational reforms, regrettably the problems persist. In the meantime, Pakistani people have worked around the lack of resources (teachers, buildings, books, papers and so on) and developed educational strategies to maximise their families' benefits from educational opportunities.

### **Educational strategies**

Education may not be an option for all children within one family. In both poor urban and rural areas, it is common for elder children to begin apprenticeships of work below the age of 10 while their younger siblings attend primary and occasionally middle school. This may be cruel but the intent is not to be cruel. It is not punishment for the elder children but rather an appraisal of what is possible in the circumstances. High mortality rates and poor social security arrangements make it risky and possibly irresponsible for a poor family to send all of their children to school at one time. Should the family wage earner die prematurely, some and possibly all of those school going children will be forced to drop out and the family risks losing the opportunity to have an educated child for that generation. By concentrating the educational opportunities onto a small number of children, the family might hope to ensure the greatest benefit from new social and economic benefits that come with education, while maintaining the more immediate benefit of low income apprentice based wages. In rural areas, demands

by landowners sometimes mean that children must participate in agricultural activities to ensure a healthy crop.

While this notion of investment in the collective may not be precisely what Marriott [1976] had in mind when he described Indian society as characterised by ‘dividuals’, the notion is surely at the heart of these educational strategies. Families’ choices demonstrate aspects of Barth’s [1959; 1967] profit maximisation with Marriott’s and Strathern’s [1988] ideas of partible persons who are the product of their group membership. Poor families’ educational strategies seek therefore to create new benefits, not for individual children but rather for the collective; this will consequently tend to preclude families from investing in girls’ education since wage earning opportunities for women in Pakistan are less abundant than for men. It does not, therefore, require Pakistanis to be either chauvinists or misogynists to understand why they might opt to send a son to school rather than a daughter (assuming that they may send only one out of three or four children to school).

### **Village schools**

From 1998 to 1999, I lived and worked in the village of Bhalot in Attock District, Punjab, Pakistan. Bhalot is a landlord dominated village. Six households of related families own virtually all the land in and around the village. Members of this family serve as *de facto* village councillors and frequently act as arbiters in disputes. They are the most important employer for work within the village. They are also the primary patrons of the local state primary schools. There are three primary schools in Bhalot. Two are single sex state schools and one is a co-educational private school. The private school is the only one that can count on the teacher showing up on a regular basis.

The single sex state schools sit on land donated by the village landlords in the 1950s. For the first 30 years only a boys school existed. In the 1980s land was donated for a girls school and the building was constructed shortly after that. Up until the 1970s the children of landlords attended this school along with other local village children. Since the 1980s no child of a landlord has attended primary school in the village. There are numerous reasons given for this; most correspond to elevated class expectations and a desire not to be seen as villagers (*gao rehne wala*). The absence of children of landlord has almost certainly had a detrimental affect on the primary school. Whereas in the 1960s landlords felt an obligation to keep track of school activities, today they believe this is the job of the parents of students. Unfortunately villagers who send their children to the local primary school are accustomed to relying on landlords to liaise on their behalf in all interactions with the state. The illiteracy rate among village adult males (roughly 16 and older) is between 70% and 80%. Villagers consequently find interrogating the school teacher both puzzling and intimidating. Although they are critical of the teachers the state sends to the school, they lack the confidence and the knowledge to query them on their qualifications of methods. In addition, they have such trouble keeping teachers coming to the school so even when they

are very unhappy with a teacher, they are very hesitant to complain lest the teacher simply stop coming altogether.

There were three teachers at the boys state school during my fieldwork. When I first arrived there were two working together and they seemed to have a very effective organisation. They had divided the boys according to age (5-7/8 and 8-10/11). The small two room building was inadequate to house the 70-80 children who might show up, so classes were frequently held in the courtyard. Boys used small chalk boards to write their lessons since blank notebooks were too expensive. I returned to Britain for a short time to arrange things for my extended field trip. Upon my return the two efficient teachers had been replaced by a somewhat less organised fellow. The new teacher was clearly out of his depth in terms of discipline and subject matter. I had intended to volunteer in the school a few days a week but I found it far too disturbing to watch this new teacher beat the small boys with a large stick. I did my best not to judge him for it-- I am well aware that notions of child abuse vary across cultures<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless, I was not the only one who found the new teacher less than ideal for the job. Over the winter the teacher seemed to spend as much time in the local tea shop (locally called the 'hotel') as he did in the school room. As the weather got warmer he frequently did not show up at all. The boys would linger in front of the school playing cricket in the morning. If the teacher showed up they went to school, if not they returned home and worked for their families.

The girls state school was a long standing issue of contention in the village. The landlords had donated the land. They argued that it was up to the state to provide the building and teachers. The state provided a building but no wall and no toilet. Occasionally teachers showed up but the girls school was less than eight square metres in interior surface area. The large numbers of girls who might have liked to attend simply could not fit inside this tiny room at one time. Unlike the boys, there was no courtyard and it was not deemed acceptable by anyone involved to have the girls take their lessons in conditions where they could be watched. The village hosted a *k'huli kacheri* (a grievance session with prominent civil servants and politicians) and the most frequent complaint regarding the girls school was that the girls could not go to the toilet because if they went outside people could see them. Village and landlord men were united in their opinion that the girls should not go to a school that did not have an enclosed toilet and a walled courtyard. Following the *k'huli kacheri* the state allocated funds for the wall, an additional room and an enclosed toilet. When these were finally built (which is a tale worthy of a paper all by itself), two women began coming more regularly to teach the girls. The girls school then began to have more regular and reliable lessons than the boys school which had simultaneously degenerated into something that no one I spoke to was even remotely satisfied with.

In the single sex schools children must wear a uniform *shalwar kameez*. Boys wear orange, girls wear white with a blue *duppatta*. Although both schools are supposed to be paid for by the state, the

teachers in both schools demanded a supplemental charge of Pak. Rs. 5 per month from each child. They justified this in reasonable ways. The boys teacher's salary did not cover the cost of petrol for him to bring his small motorcycle to the village everyday. He tried to get me to persuade the landlords to provide him a house so he could come to the village every day. He told me that he came to the village every time he had petrol in his motorcycle. His absences, he argued, were beyond his control. For all my criticisms of the man, the salary of village teachers is appallingly low in Pakistan. The female teachers argued much the same thing. They required the supplemental charge to ensure that they could come to the village regularly.

The teacher at the private school, Mrs. Saleema<sup>3</sup>, lives in a nearby village but has local kin connections and is held in reasonably high esteem. Children wear a uniform of blue trousers and blue shirt with striped tie for boys, and blue skirt and blue blouse for girls. The girls additionally wear a blue head scarf. Mrs. Saleema wears *shalwar kameez* and a *duppatta* as head cover. Mrs. Saleema does not take the children outside of the courtyard of the small school compound for any lessons. I never saw, or heard, of Mrs. Saleema leaving the children unattended. For the privilege of attending this school children paid Pak. Rs. 25 per month and had to buy their books which might be as expensive as Pak Rs. 100. As with the girls school prior to its refurbishment, there is no enclosed toilet in the private school. This causes some concern among parents but they are keenly aware that the private school offers the most structured education in the village. For poor villagers, this private school is the most prestigious institution possible. So while they can and do grumble and complain to people like me, I have never seen them be anything but deferential and courteous to Mrs. Saleema.

### **Parents expectations**

I spent a great deal of time wondering why parents sent their children to schools where teacher attendance was irregular and pupils were quite severely beaten for very trivial offences. The results of this education were dubious at best. Among village boys over the age of 10 who had attended 5 years of school in the local state boys school, a distressing number were functionally illiterate in Urdu. None were functionally literate in English (which was one of the subjects they were meant to be learning). When I tried to organise a census team my first choice of census takers were unable to take the job because they could not read either the Urdu or English version of my census. I was finally able to put together a team from teenage boys who were students at the secondary school in a neighbouring village. I am unsure whether these boys were exceptionally good prior to going to the secondary school or whether they learned their skills there, but I continually found that knowing someone had five years of primary education in the village did not imply literacy. Nevertheless, both parents and children are proud of school attendance. Consequently I suggest that parental expectations were only partially linked to knowledge and skill acquisition.



Looking at household and family strategies beyond education provide some clues. Lyon and Fischer [1997] in their discussion of urban family structures in a suburb of Lahore, argue that the Pakistani family must be seen as an important economic unit. In the context of poor urban communities, they suggest that inheritable property is not an influencing factor in household composition and family strategies. Like the poor villagers in Bhalot, they have no land; instead the household serves as both a resource and labour pooling institution. In Greentown, the focus of Lyon's and Fischer's study, increasing the number of wage earners in a household was a common strategy. This could be done in a variety of ways. They report that households take in elderly relatives who may be used to care for small children (thus freeing women for wage labour), delaying marriage age of children (thus keeping resources under the household's control for a longer period of time) and, significantly, limiting education to children (thus making an earlier working and wage earning age possible) [Lyon and Fischer 1997: 171-172]. The division between rural and urban societies has been questioned since at least the time that Eglar did her seminal field research in the 1950s [1959]. Elsewhere I have argued that there important continuities in rural and urban cultural and social practice [Lyon 2002]. It is not surprising, therefore, that there are considerable similarities in strategies for maximising household economic resources between a poor suburb of Greentown and the poor landless villagers of Bhalot village.

This leaves me with the puzzle of why parents send their children to school. Sending children to apprenticeships surely would be the more rational strategy for poor people, when faced with the option of a clearly inadequate, under-resourced school or a wage earning 8 year old. This logic did not escape my Bhaloti friends and neighbours. Indeed they did not normally send all of their children to school. This privilege was normally reserved for younger children.

### **Case study - educating a daughter**

Mohammed Ahmed, one of the servants of a landlord family, sent both of his sons to a nearby city to apprentice in different jobs at the age of 8, but he used their incomes to send his daughter to the private school in the village. He was obviously making a strategic decision about which child would receive a formal education. When I asked him why he sent his daughter and not his sons he first shrugged and said it was Allah's will. I continued to raise this topic for months until I got a more satisfactory answer (to me, obviously he thought Allah's will was more than sufficient). He explained that his sons would be able to marry poor girls because they would have wages. Since he was very poor and did not expect to be able to raise a good dowry, he believed that an education would ensure that he and his wife would be able to arrange a good husband for their daughter. He did not have unrealistic expectations of her marrying a rich man (I am not sure he would have desired that as it would tend to place undue burdens of reciprocity on his family), but he wanted his daughter to marry a man that would treat her with respect. When I suggested that his sons might be able to earn more money had they been educated, he shrugged again and said it was Allah's will. Later



conversations suggested that he did not really know what occupations his sons might have been able to have with a good education. The only thing he thought they might have been able to do was join the Army but he believed that requires more than literacy. Army jobs require connections which he did not have.

He made a choice which I can only say seemed entirely reasonable and rational in his situation. He knew better than me the problems with the local boys school and the questionable benefit of non-functional literacy. Recognising letters and being able to write one's name is probably a useful skill but not one that opens many career doors. Learning to be a welder, in contrast, could lead to lifelong security. In any event, an employed welder who has 15 years experience at the age of 23 (assuming he has not gone blind or otherwise incapacitated from a work related injury) is a promising potential spouse.

But is this a reasonable way of explaining parental expectations of education? Is it truly all about arranging a marriage and finding an appropriate ('good') potential spouse for one's children? The quick answer is no. There is certainly more to it than that. Nevertheless, I suggest that this may be one of the most important factor in poor people's choice to educate their children. Marriage is one of the most important and difficult life processes in Pakistan. Donnan [1988] describes the intricacies of arranging a marriage and the emphasis on endogamy among Pakistani Muslims. Fischer argues that underlying Pakistani marriage is a common belief that like should marry like (see Fischer [1991] and Fischer and Finkelstein [1991]). Spouses should ideally be members of the same recognised kinship group (either patrilineal or matrilineal). Failing this, they should be of the same *qaum* or *zat*<sup>4</sup>. Within these generally accepted preferences, it is further desirable that marriages should be between economic equals. Rich and poor relatives find subtle ways of avoiding direct marriages between their children.

It is therefore highly undesirable for a poor family to over educate a daughter. While some education may attract a better potential husband, too much will make the girl unlike all eligible men around her. Even if she receives a very good education, she will still be related to a poor family. Even a rich family wanted to take her as a daughter-in-law, it would be seen as a poor match simply because the two families could not enter into appropriate reciprocal relations. Among those families whose economic situation would be appropriate it may be difficult to find a young man who has sufficient education to be seen to be the equal of the young woman. The reverse situation is also difficult. An over educated poor young man may find that there are very few women for which he is seen as an ideal husband. An over educated man is unlike his peers and being different is not an advantage in arranged marriages [see Donnan 1988; Fischer and Finkelstein 1992 for a more complete discussion of the importance of similarity between marriage partners].

## **Suggestions for educational reforms**

Unlike many of the topics which interest me, this is one where I feel an obligation to do more than just analyse the situation. Poverty in Pakistan has reached dangerous levels. The ongoing tensions between Pakistan and India have been exacerbated by global phenomena which continue to defy comprehension yet have a very real destabilising effect on both countries. So at the risk of angering people for whom I have tremendous respect, I would like to make certain recommendations for educational reforms. I do this with a certain amount of trepidation since I emphatically reject the idea that I have any right to impose changes on people of other nations. I have only a few recommendations and while I believe that each of them has considerable merit, I admit that I do not actually like any of them.

1. It is imperative that education reforms not simply be a disguised form of social engineering to correct existing inequalities between genders or classes.
2. Single sex education remains the most realistic option.
3. It may be necessary to stagger investment in boys and girls education. In the immediate future it is preferable that boys be educated slightly longer than girls.
4. The state should provide scholarships to cover the entire cost of primary and secondary schooling to one child per household married couple.

These recommendations are motivated by both an ideological position as well as a practical observation. Boasian anthropology was founded on the notion that groups of people the world over are different from, but not better or worse than each other. This may be as important a concept today as it was then. People in South Asia do things that are objectionable, immoral and even illegal by European standards. There are a few activities in Europe which I do not approve of and would like to see disappear. There are many things that happen in the United States I find barbaric and unacceptable. Yet clearly, some percentage of Europeans and Americans continue to behave in ways I find morally or ethically wrong. Even more clearly, not all Europeans and Americans agree with me that these behaviours are in any way wrong. Yet, foreign aid workers continue to go to Pakistan and try to urge adoption of norms and values which are not universally held in their own home countries. It probably goes without saying, but I will say it anyway, Pakistan is home to cultural groups who have seen considerable change and disruption. Their social and cultural practices have emerged in response to the economic and environmental influences around them. The fact that Pakistan exists at all should be reason enough for foreigners to be wary of wading in with suggestions for radical social change. All societies change and Pakistan is no different. But unless we really know the economic and social implications of social institutions we must be cautious in trying to change them.

## Conclusion

I hasten to add that I do not enjoy the inequalities which are endemic to Pakistan. I do not relish being treated as 'Doctor Sahib' who cannot be asked to make a cup of tea or sweep or do any other menial chore. I am not a romantic looking at the residues of Pakistani feudalism and imagining some rosy noble harmonious organic society. Pakistan is a deeply troubled country and I believe that things must change or Pakistan will never be anything by a low income country with an Oxfam EPI of 99 out of 104. Nor do I want to hide behind the cover of being a 'realist'. I do not think Pakistan has to be the way it is. I have tried to explain some of the problems with rural schools in Pakistan. I described areas which I suggested indicate that schooling is not necessarily the best strategy for poor families. I then suggested one of important reason why education continues to be desired even if it does not guarantee economic or social improvement. I followed this with some hesitant suggestions about measures that Pakistani national, provincial and local governments might improve education in ways which are compatible with existing expectations and values (prejudices?). I stopped short of the most radical suggestion I would very much like to see but which I think is draconian in the extreme: banning all private schools. The reported high quality of the village schools in the 1970s and 1980s was a direct result of the fact that the children of landowners attended the school. If the middle classes were obliged to send their children to state schools then I would hope standards would rise. I did not recommend this and do not think it is really a good idea. If one could go back in time and prevent the creation of the myriad private schools then I think the state of education for the poor would be better in Pakistan, but that is impossible. I have not seen any reason to suppose that radical disruption of existing institutions has been beneficial for the poor in the past, so I would not subject my Pakistani friends so such a thing now.

This paper has been an attempt to merge applied and theoretical interests in education. I have, of course, failed to address other benefits of education because I chose to focus specifically on village schools which do not seem to offer employment benefits in the way that schools for the urban middle classes do. I also realise that I have been somewhat critical of institutions which are desperately under financed with personnel who are under qualified and yet who continue to do their best. They try very hard and perhaps I am too hard on them. If I am, my only defence is that much of my opinion was formed after much discussion with the parents of children who attended those schools.

## Notes

\* I would like to thank Wenonah Lyon for her valuable comments. In particular for her clarity in recognising the parallels with health care programmes in the Punjab.

1. They dropped the ability to do simple sums for the purposes of the 1996/1997 survey.
2. When I lived in Pakistan in 1982, I came across a Pakistani acquaintance slapping a small boy about 9 years old. I intervened and slapped the young man. The young man was shocked and the little boy kicked me and told me white men should stay out of things they don't understand.
3. All names in this paper are pseudonyms.
4. *Qaum* and *zat* may be inadequately translated as caste, so long as it is understood that Dumontian notions of purity and pollution do not apply. Nor, interestingly can one apply Leach's notions of occupational speciality. In many cases, these categories suggest more of the notion of tribe, as is found among Pukhtun groups in northern Pakistan and Afghanistan.

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